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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NOUAKCHOTT 000409

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SUBJECT: DISCRIMINATION PREVENTING AFRO-MAURITANIANS IN THE  
SOUTH FROM REGISTERING TO VOTE

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- The critically important national census and voter registration drive is entering its final month amid allegations of discrimination against Afro-Mauritanians, especially in the south, where most Afro-Mauritanians live.

-- Based on a recent visit by Embassy PolOff Morris to southern Mauritania, Embassy believes the allegations have merit. Many Afro-Mauritanians appear to have been excluded, at least so far in the census and registration process.

-- But it is impossible to say how many, and statistics provided by the Independent Electoral Commission suggest that the numbers are small. With a month to go, an estimated 69.5 percent of all voters have been registered nationwide, according to the statistics. In the south, the percentage registered in some provinces is at this point in the process as low as 62 percent. But the problem could be worse than the statistics indicate, since many observers believe the Commission's statistics to be erroneous.

-- Afro-Mauritanians are prevented from registering because they cannot get national ID cards. The ID cards are crucial. Without them, Mauritaniens cannot be included in the census rolls and voter registration lists. The cards are processed throughout the country with little hassle for Moors, both White and Black. But credible reports indicate police in the south are requiring Afro-Mauritanians to wait in line for hours and to show significantly more documentation than Moors.

-- Mauritanian government officials say they have a well-grounded fear of fraud, and that is what has led to delays and the requirement for more documentation. They say that Mauritania has an enormous problem with illegal immigration, especially from Sub-Saharan Black Africa.

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(C) Comments  
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-- Embassy believes that fraud and illegal immigration are significant problems in Mauritania, but a greater force is at

work: deep structural discrimination and prejudice against Black African Mauritians by the Moorish majority. If not mitigated, this disfranchisement of a segment of the voting population will threaten the integrity of the transition to democracy. Unrepresentative census and voter lists will lead inexorably to flawed elections.

-- The exclusion of Afro-Mauritians, if in sufficiently large number, will make it difficult for UN auditors to determine that Mauritania's voter lists meet international standards. The UN has said it will have to pull out its electoral assistance team, if UN auditors conclude that these international standards have not been met. UN auditors are scheduled to come for 10 days in June to observe the constitutional referendum, the first in a series of votes and elections leading to a transfer of power to an elected government by the end of May 2007.

-- There is some good news. Mauritania's Independent Electoral Commission will undertake next week a mid-term assessment with the assistance of the UN electoral assistance mission. The results of that assessment will give Embassy a better idea of the severity of the problem and what it will take to fix it to an acceptable degree.

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(C) Embassy's Next Steps  
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-- Ambassador is to see Colonel Fal, the head of the Military Council, on Friday, April 7th. Ambassador intends to focus the meeting on the problems reported in the south. He will press Fal to take immediate action to fix these problems. With the extension of the census and registration campaign

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until the end of April, it is not too late for Fal to act.

-- Embassy will continue to push at all levels of Mauritanian society and government to convince Mauritians that inclusiveness and the principle of one person one vote are the bedrock for free and fair elections.

-- Embassy also will work closely with the UN and international partners to assess and redress the issue. Embassy now meets at least weekly with UN reps to coordinate efforts.

-- Embassy will continue its close collaboration with NDI to encourage political parties and civil society to press the transitional government to take more action in registering qualified voters. Embassy also meets with NDI at least weekly.

End Key Points and Comments.

1. (C) As the census to register voters finishes its first phase of door-to-door canvassing and enters into April's "fixed post" phase, there are indications that Afro-Mauritians have been undercounted in relation to the general population. But hard statistics are impossible to get. The population reportedly is never counted by ethnic group, and the current census effort is no exception. Nevertheless, a mid-term assessment by the Electoral Commission scheduled for next week may provide a clearer picture as to the extent of the problem.

2. (C) According to figures made available by the Electoral Commission, as of March 30, 904,874 people had been registered out of an estimated total of 1.3 million eligible voters. However, a breakdown by province (wilaya) indicates that in provinces where Moors are thought to predominate, there is a higher registration rate by a few percentage points than the in the provinces where Afro-Mauritians almost certainly predominate.

13. (C) The lowest percentages of voters registered are in the southern provinces of Guidimaka (62.16 pct) and Gorgol (63.2 pct). The ethnically mixed region of Brakna, a bit to the north, is at 71.76 pct. In the predominantly White Moor province of Adrar, the registration rate is at 85.6 percent. In adjacent and sparsely populated Inchiri province, the census and voter registration drive appears to be almost complete.

14. (C) According to the Commission's statistics, there are a total of 57,648 Mauritians throughout the country who do not have national ID cards. That's about 5% of the total number of Mauritanian voters, according to the Commission's statistics. If a Mauritanian does not have an identity card, that Mauritanian is unable to register to vote.

15. (C) Our discussions with political party leaders and partners such as NDI and the EU, along with a recent visit by Poloff to the Gorgol and Brakna provinces in the south, have led us to conclude the Commission's figures probably understate the problem. Further, while we have seen indications that census resources have not been equally apportioned throughout Mauritania, the fundamental problem lies in the process of issuing the national ID card, the important first step to voter registration.

16. (C) Ambassador raised the issue of discrimination in the south during a March 23 meeting with the National Independent Electoral Commission. The question was received coolly, and Commission president Cheikh Sid'Ahmed Ould Babamine denied that there were problems particular to the Afro-Mauritanian community. While there were problems with the census country-wide, he said, he believed the situation would improve over time.

17. (C) Babamine added that the government had the responsibility to determine nationality and limit fraudulent applications. He said the police have found instances where foreigners have erroneously received ID cards. Babamine estimated that 10 percent of Mauritians do not have ID cards, and regional Commission representatives have been

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instructed to report to the commission cases where legitimate Mauritians were denied ID cards, but he said that the commission had not yet received any such reports.

18. (C) In PolOff's meetings with southern prefects, officials were clearly sensitive towards the notion of registration problems in the south. The southern prefects were dismissive of any problems; instead, presenting PolOff with an optimistic assessment of census progress. When officials have addressed allegations of discrimination, they have stuck closely to their position that those Black Africans denied in the south are illegal immigrants trying to fraudulently claim Mauritanian citizenship.

19. (C) NDI Political Party Program Director Eric Duhaime told Ambassador that NDI is encouraging other political parties to follow the lead of two other parties that sent letters to the government and the Electoral Commission demanding that they address the registration problems in the south.

110. (C) NDI is now considering organizing a joint political party press conference to raise public awareness about the problems. Ambassador strongly supported this idea. NDI is meeting imminently with representatives from the EU who "are very concerned about these problems and are looking for ways to pressure the government and Electoral Commission to act," Duhaime said.

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DISCRIMINATION IN GETTING ID CARDS, NOT IN THE CENSUS  
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¶11. (C) Of the seven villages that PolOff visited in his three-day mission to the Gorgol and Brakna regions, six were Afro-Mauritanian, and one (Bir El Barka) was Black Moor. In four of the six Afro-Mauritanian villages, residents said that between 50 and 65 percent of the eligible population had been registered, with the other two villages reporting less than 20 percent registration. All six villages reported the same problems in applying for ID cards, with each village saying that a majority of their eligible voting population without ID cards had applied at least one time. While the figures they provided were rough estimates, collectively the six villages reported that between 1,500 and 2,000 residents had applied for ID cards with fewer than 50 receiving them.

¶12. (C) Afro-Mauritanians living throughout the south reported deliberate discrimination by police charged with issuing the National ID cards. "We arrive early in the morning and wait in lines for hours, before eventually being told that we are missing some document and will need to return when our papers are in order," one villager said, while another reported that "when a Moor arrives they just walk to the front of the line and the officer takes their application without question." In response to PolOff's question about villagers' motivations to wait in line only to be told to return the following day and wait in line again, one villager said "if we can get registered and vote, then maybe we won't have to wait in line any more...maybe our children won't have to wait in line the next time."

¶13. (C) Afro-Mauritanians stated that they are asked to provide significantly more documentation than are Moors. According to multiple accounts, the police ask Afro-Mauritanians to show their birth certificate, the birth certificates of their mother and father, their Certificate of Nationality, and their receipt from the previous Mauritanian census. Moors on the other hand are asked only for their birth certificate -- in accordance with government regulations.

¶14. (C) For those who lack the required documents, the local prefect is empowered to receive the applicant and adjudicate their request for an ID card. If the prefect is satisfied, he can instruct the police to process the ID request. According to numerous accounts -- by both Moors and Afro-Mauritanians -- prefects are approving requests from a majority of Moors, but blocking requests from Afro-Mauritanians.

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¶15. (C) In the Black Moor (Arabized Black African) village of Bir El Barka, villagers reported that approximately 90 percent of their eligible voters had been registered, and that all but three of what the assistant village chief estimated to be 80 people that had applied for ID cards had received them. PolOff spoke separately to two groups of Black Moors, both of whom corroborated what the Afro-Mauritanian community had been saying. "We know the standards are different for us...for all Moors, than for Afro-Mauritanians," assistant village chief Mohamed Ould Bulkheir Ekmich said, adding that "the authorities are afraid of registering Senegalese, so they just decided to be safe and not register any blacks without IDs."

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DISCRIMINATION V. RACIAL PROFILING  
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¶16. (C) First, it is important to acknowledge that overt discrimination is clearly at work in Mauritania and that most likely, police and prefects (if not authorities at a higher level) are actively working to discourage Afro-Mauritanian participation in elections. But why? Do the authorities simply not want Black Africans, Mauritanian or otherwise, to become recognized citizens and participate in elections? Or is there a sincere belief among the authorities that most

Black African ID card applicants are in fact illegal immigrants, not entitled to Mauritanian citizenship?

¶17. (C) Moors, both white and black, speak a common language (Hassania), which is largely unique to Mauritania. The two groups also share a common culture and style of dress. As a result, there is little doubt (in the mind of the predominately Moorish authorities) that fellow Moors have a credible claim to Mauritanian citizenship (with or without their National ID cards). Afro-Mauritanians, on the other hand are often culturally and linguistically indistinguishable from their Senegalese or Malian neighbors, and often are members of a family or tribe that stretches beyond Mauritania's border. Add to this the palpable Moorish fear that the growing influx of black African immigrants looking for work in "oil rich" Mauritania will ultimately lessen the Moorish stranglehold on power, and you begin to get a sense of the problem.  
LeBaron